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ABSTRACT

The shift in focus of ethnic studies in American universities from Western European nations toward the developing nations of the Third World represents a growing recognition of the reality of international interdependence versus the myth of American independence. American economic and political interests in the Third World emphasize the importance of considering Third World outlooks and opinions which were largely ignored in the past. Ethnic studies have thus emerged as the academic community's response to the general need to study and understand Third World cultures. Because of the tendency in the United States to regard Third World peoples as exotic, ethnic studies face the challenges of presenting accurate and realistic perspectives on developing nations, avoiding an inherent Western cultural slant in such studies, and employing cultural relativism instead of imposing culturally biased judgments on Third World experiences. Those involved in ethnic studies have an obligation to ensure that information and knowledge about the Third World are used in ways that are useful and not detrimental to the peoples of those nations. By combating myth and prejudice with fact, and by revealing commonalities of human experience, ethnic studies can contribute to promoting communication and understanding among peoples from different backgrounds. (Author/MJL)

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Ethnic Studies and the Politics of Higher Education

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The curricula of America's colleges and universities have historically revealed a disdain for inquiry into areas of study that are not Western European based in origin or focus. Fortunately, this attitude is changing as the operational realities of the world are shifting, and courses in Ethnic Studies are slowly gaining respectability as an important part of the academic enterprise. Those of us who are idealists might characterize this development as somewhat belated recognition by our institutions of higher learning that there are peoples and activities outside of the Western World that deserve serious intellectual scrutiny. Those of us who are more cynical, however, tend to attribute the acceptance of Ethnic Studies to other social and political causes, such as the urban disorders of the 1960's, the Vietnam War, the rise of OPEC, the North-South dialogue sessions, and most significantly, the emergence of Third World nations.

Third World countries are developing nations that do not align themselves with either the American or the Soviet camps. They are overwhelmingly populated by people of color--Black, Brown, and Yellow--and they are the former victims of colonialism, imperialism, and neocolonialism. Equally as important, these Third World nations try to define their interests in terms of what will benefit the indigenous population, rather than the multi-national corporations that often have dominated their economies for decades.[1] Actions taken by the indigenous people of these countries understandably tend to be nationalistic, but are often interpreted as

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anti-American or anti-Western. Washington's initial response of righteous indignation at the non-aligned postures taken by these nations has been followed by a more reasoned reaction that we, as Americans, need to know more about, and thus be better able to understand these Third World people.

My contention is that Ethnic Studies programs, to a large degree, represent a societal response to the increasing impact that the shifting international economic and political situations mean to the United States. The illusion of "Fortress Americana" has come to an end. Though undeniably still an economic and military superpower, the United States is no longer able to dictate its will to other nations without concern of reprisal or retribution. The reality of dependence--on raw materials, on customers for finished goods, and on ideological and military allies--has driven home to American politicians and statesmen the reality of interdependence and has shattered the myth of independence. In some measure, Ethnic Studies represent an academic response to this realization as we launch efforts to understand the cultures and perspectives of different people--people whom we might formerly have dismissed as insignificant or unimportant.

As the society leads, so does higher education follow, and presently the significance of learning about non-Western cultures, and about people from other cultures who live within our national boundaries, is considered to be a worthwhile and meaningful activity by our country's leaders. It is not difficult to see why.

For one thing, United States economic interests depend on Third World nations for a major part of the vital raw materials needed for our industrial economy. Twenty-five per cent of U.S. manufactured exports went to Third World countries in 1978, more than to the entire European community. More than half a million U.S. manufacturing jobs produce for export to

Third World countries, and these are non-oil producing nations. U.S. exports to Third World nations have increased from $16 billion in 1973 to more than $34 billion in 1978, which makes these countries by far the fastest growing market for American goods. Simultaneously, imports from the Third World grew from $16 billion to $40 billion in the same period of time.[2] At present, twenty-five per cent of United States direct investment is located in the Third World. Clearly, it is in the economic interest of America to pay heed to concerns of Third World nations--Uncle Sam cannot afford to do otherwise.

So, from an economic standpoint, and in strictly pragmatic terms, the Third World countries represent important long term opportunities for the U.S. They have vast and potentially expanding markets that would provide excellent opportunities for the future growth of American industrial productive capacity. Further, the low-cost goods that are exported by Third World countries help to check inflation in this country and to improve the standard of living here in America.

The relationship between the economic and the academic communities has fused and become increasingly symbiotic regarding the maintenance of the American life style by controlling resources and knowledge. Clark Kerr, former president of the University of California, has observed that "the University and segments of industry are becoming more and more alike...the two worlds are merging physically...[the University is] a mechanism held together by administrative rules and powered by money."[3] Further, "intellectuals have played a significant role in producing the obfuscations of the time, and the educational system has been one of the leading contributors to the pathology of awareness."[4] Academia has obligingly focused its attention on various areas of the world when knowledge about those places is important to this country's vital interests.

From an international political standpoint, America needs to maintain its present allies, and, if possible, to cultivate new ones in order to counter what is perceived as an increasing threat from the nations of the Communist bloc. This realization has become the crux of American foreign policy and has spilled over into the academic arena as well. Witness the growth of area studies programs, courses in international economics, and the increasing numbers of international students studying in the United States as both a reflection of and a response to this phenomenon.

It is not coincidental that the U.S. has expressed anxiety and resentment at the fact that 119 of the countries represented in the United Nations consider themselves to be part of the Third World. These Third World nations have been vocal in condemning American actions that they consider to be antagonistic toward developing countries. There is an economic as well as a political link because financial assistance to Third World nations is channeled through such Western dominated agencies as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Many Third World nations feel, and not without good reason, that their expressed attitude toward America is a significant determinant in how much assistance they are likely to receive from these international funding agencies.[5] Still, the point is that Third World nations can and do embarrass the United States in an international forum when they believe the circumstances call for such action. As a result, consideration of the outlooks and opinions of Third World countries has been given added significance, and the study of Third World cultures has gained academic respectability via Ethnic Studies programs.

A reluctant awareness seems to be taking hold that global boundaries have lost their significance. There is a growing recognition that what affects one of us eventually affects all of us. If other nations are not successful in improving the lives of their people, we will not be able to insulate ourselves from the consequences. Given this scenario, Ethnic Studies courses and programs represent a kind of knee-jerk response in the academic community to the rapidity with which global boundaries are shrinking. The inherent danger with the kind of reflexive process through which Ethnic Studies programs have materialized and receive their sanction is that fundamental assumptions regarding Third World people may remain in place even though Ethnic Studies become a part of the academic structure.

Racism and ethnocentrism die hard, and even on campuses where Ethnic Studies programs flourish, there is still a tendency to regard Third World peoples as "exotics", and there remains an undercurrent of feeling in America that Third World involvement with the United States will be on our terms, just as it has been in the past. The fallacy here is that Third World countries are acutely conscious of the role America has played in maintaining and extending colonialism and imperialism around the world. With its unflattering history of racist thought and practice, the U.S. is regarded by Third World countries as being exploitative and domineering. The task faced by Ethnic Studies programs is to present accurate and realistic conceptions of Third World peoples so that fact and perspective about the developing nations can hopefully counter some of the myth and prejudice that presently exist.

If Ethnic Studies materials are to be meaningful in their focus on peoples and events from the Third World, extreme care must be used to ensure

that they do not contain an inherent Western cultural slant. It's critical that Ethnic Studies courses and programs be careful not to present Third World peoples as academic entertainment, nor to justify previous policies and practices that have been used against the developing nations. In Western societies, the display of artifacts and instruments from the Third World has often served an entertainment function, providing a kind of recreational outlet for white people at the expense of non-white peoples. To quote William Willis, "the distant colored world is often perceived as an exotic place, offering temporary escape from the familiarity of monotony of middle class society in the white world." [6] Willis believes, and I agree, that we must do more than present harmless "aboriginal" customs while avoiding the frightful contemporary realities.

By the same token, American social science has, for the most part, been written and taught in such a way as to justify the actions and policies that were manifested by Western nations in their efforts to dominate the countries of the Third World. American intervention in Vietnam was, for quite a long time, characterized as being a justifiable action that was taken with the best interest of the Vietnamese people in mind. The implication was that those poor Third World people really didn't know how to look after themselves, so the U.S. was obliged to take them under its wing. In much the same way that Allende of Chile was characterized as a radical and an extremist so that his removal could be facilitated by the C.I.A., Prime Minister Michael Manley of Jamaica and other nationalistic leaders received the same kind of vicious character assassination.

Bringing stability to a region has usually meant making it more susceptible to American political interests, and the reverse interpretation

has also been true. Thus, Nicaragua and Cuba were portrayed in substantially different ways after they slipped from the United States sphere of influence. The characterization of these nations somehow failed to note the brutality and corruption of the prevailing regimes when they were allied with Uncle Sam. Probably the most telling example, though, of the way in which Academia condones and thus justifies repression is the fact that the history of the United States is still taught with little mention of the genocide and inhumanity that was directed against Native American peoples, and with only a hint of the brutal and perfidious nature of Black Slavery.

For Ethnic Studies to have any impact, let alone any integrity in presenting information and material from the Third World, it is vital that no support be given, either explicit or implicit, to the notion that Western intervention in the developing nations was justifiable. It is important to recognize in Ethnic Studies courses that bona fide political freedom through viable national consolidation and rapid economic development is the main nationalist aspiration in the Third World. As a result, violence is predictable in the emergence of these nations, just as violence was used to subdue and repress them. Liberation struggles and the internal dissatisfaction that they represent must be acknowledged rather than overlooked when we study Third World nations, because to do otherwise is often to offer tacit support for the status quo. Regardless of what the national position is regarding the insurgent rebellion in the Philipines, or for that matter, the independence of Puerto Rico, Ethnic Studies courses and programs should acknowledge such actions as representing the expressed aspirations of substantial portions of the populations in those given areas.

One other concern that bears expression regarding Ethnic Studies and the Third World is the ever-present possibility of denigrating the cultural experiences of Third World peoples. Even those of us with the best of intentions and the keenest of insights must realize that we are under continual bombardment by sophisticated opinion-shaping devices. All of us who live in America are likely to have absorbed some measure of the prevailing attitude that the peoples of the Third World are just not as good as we are.

Great care must be exercised in Ethnic Studies courses such that negative inferences or value judgments are not made when we encounter practices and customs that are different from the ones with which we are familiar. For example, one of the topics that inevitably gets extended review and discussion is the practice of polygamy in some Third World nations. It is absolutely critical that contextual overview be provided in Ethnic Studies courses so that we can avoid the tendency to draw culturally biased judgments and conclusions on subjects such as this one. To borrow a term from anthropology, we should employ cultural relativism in Ethnic Studies programs; that is, an understanding that activities and practices in any given culture are obviously different, but that no one culture is inherently superior or inferior to any other culture.

In reference to the study of the Third World, the fundamental fact that shapes the future of Ethnic Studies is that it deals in knowledge of others. Such knowledge has always implied ethical and political responsibilities, and today the "others" that we study make those responsibilites explicit and unavoidable. We must consider the consequences of learning about others and of what becomes of what is learned. In regards to research activities, the

relevant questions are as follows:

1. Who is the public for one's research?
2. Who receives it?
3. How is it utilized?

Personally, I would take the position that information that is directly injurious to Third World communities should not be provided to persons or agencies that might make use of it to the detriment of developing nations. Many of my colleagues might disagree with this position, but I would extend it even further and say that there is an obligation on the part of those in Ethnic Studies to work toward ways in which the knowledge obtained can be helpful to those from whom it comes because not to do so is to be "neutral" on the side of the existing structure of domination. It takes no outstanding visionary to note that the "objective" nature of academic inquiry that is the cornerstone of Western educational philosophy has been a prime ingredient in the subordination of Third World peoples.

It is worth recalling what W.E.B. DuBois once stated regarding what should be the ideal curriculum for the education of African people in America. He made it abundantly clear that the heart of such a program must be the study of all things African, language, art, music, religion, philosophy, and folklore, for only by knowing where you have come from do you realize how far you can go.[7] In the same context, Ethnic Studies can provide a foundation for the liberation of oppressed peoples as we move into the twenty-first century by opening the minds of their exploiters, both on an individual and on a collective basis.

The outlook for the Third World need not continue to be one of starvation, poverty, and ignorance. Indeed, the peoples of the developing nations

insist that they will not accept such a state of affairs as being inevitable. If the developing nations are not successful in improving the lives of their people, we will not be able to insulate ourselves from the consequences. World affairs are now at the stage that human problems become political problems that do not stay bottled within national borders. The value of Ethnic Studies programs is that they can help us find some solutions to those human problems so that all of us can present a better tomorrow to those who come after us. At the least, Ethnic Studies can be of significant benefit in the clarification of the rapidly changing international picture by providing accurate information about other peoples to the American public. By combating myth and prejudice with fact, and by revealing some of the commonalities of the human experience, Ethnic Studies can contribute greatly to facilitating communication and understanding among peoples from different backgrounds.

FOOTNOTES

1. From "Building Third World Coalitions," Paper presented by William B. Harvey at the Fifth Annual Third World Conference, Chicago, March, 1979.

2. George Marotta, "More Third-World Trade Will Help U.S. Economy," Newsday, May 30, 1980, p.43.

3. Richard Lichtman, "The University: Mask for Privilege?" in The University Crisis Reader, ed. by Immanuel Wallerstein and Paul Starr, Random House (New York: 1971), p.103.

4. Ibid., p.106.

5. From "Ethnic Studies and the Emergence of the Third World," Paper presented by William B. Harvey at the Eighth Annual Conference of the Society for Ethnic and Special Studies, Atlanta, October, 1980.

6. William S. Willis, Jr., "Skeleton in the Anthropological Closet," in Reinventing Anthropology, ed. Dell Hymes, Vintage Books (New York: 1969), p.142.

7. W.E.B. DuBois, "The Field and Function of the Negro College," in The Education of Black People, by W.E.B. DuBois, ed. by Herbert Aptheker, Monthly Review Press, (New York: 1973), p.93.